Re-evaluating John Brown's Raid at Harpers Ferry

by Karen Whitman

Introduction

On the evening of October 16, 1859, John Brown and twenty-one other men launched an attack on the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry,[1] the beginning of a long-range plan to destroy the slave system in the South. They were successful in capturing the Arsenal, but soon lost their superior position, due partly to circumstances which delayed the raiding party from leaving the Arsenal and retreating into the mountains above Harpers Ferry. The next day the group was surrounded by the Virginia militia, and on Tuesday morning U. S. Marines, under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee, battered down the doors of the engine house in the Armory yard and captured John Brown and his surviving comrades. In the course of the raid ten of Brown's men were killed; seven, including Brown himself, were captured and later hanged, and five escaped. There is evidence also that several slaves and free Negroes from the Harpers Ferry region participated in the raid; those who were killed or captured were surreptitiously disposed of by the State of Virginia, and those who escaped went quickly and quietly back to their residences in order to avoid detection.[2]

In *The Inner Civil War*, George M. Fredrickson describes John Brown as "a narrow-minded and possibly insane religious fanatic."[3] This dismissal of Brown as a lunatic or, at best, a religious fanatic, is common among contemporary historians. It is ironic that the Civil War, which cost 600,000 lives, is today considered a "reasonable" or at least "understandable" event in our history, but John Brown's raid is disregarded as the bloody act of a "madman."[4]

In 1859, the raid at Harpers Ferry was taken much more seriously, both by abolitionists and by the defenders of slavery. Several prominent abolitionists aided Brown with money and weapons in his preparations for Harpers Ferry and in his earlier fight in

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[1] In this paper, Harpers Ferry will be spelled two different ways. When quoting nineteenth-century sources the apostrophe will be retained. In the rest of the text, the modern spelling without the apostrophe will be used.

[2] Bartle Slavin, *John Brown: The Sword and the Word* (New York, 1970), 135-141.

[3] George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War* (New York, 1965), 38.

[4] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York, 1965), 661. Morison calls Brown a "madman with a method."

"bleeding Kansas." Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were asked to join the raiders, and Harriet Tubman agreed to participate but was ill at the time of the raid. And, although the immediate reaction to the raid was shock on the part of the less militant abolitionists, many openly applauded the action and honored the raiders before the year was out. The raid at Harpers Ferry was influential in persuading Northern abolitionists that moral suasion would not be sufficient to end the slave system and that more direct action was necessary.

The South took Brown seriously, also. Under interrogation in jail he answered questions with dignity and forthrightness, and several of his captors expressed their respect for the lean, bearded old man. The conduct of John Brown during his incarceration and trial was so strong and unwavering that slavery went on trial rather than slavery's captive. The South was deeply agitated by the raid, especially by Brown's plan to draw slaves from Virginia into the mountains to build a guerrilla force that would eventually liberate all slaves. The slave system trembled in fear of slave uprisings, especially after the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831.

In order to understand the raid as a serious and important attempt to end slavery in North America, there are several questions which need to be answered about the event and about its organizer: What were the motives and the intent of John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry? What concrete abolitionist support did Brown get for the raid? What were the affects of the raid on the North and the South? If we discover clear evidence that Brown was a rational and respected man who attempted a dangerous but feasible action and made a significant contribution to ending slavery, then we must ask one final question: Why do present-day historians so frequently dismiss John Brown as a fanatic?

Attempts to disclose John Brown's motives and his total plan began immediately after the raid. The Mason Committee, a Congressional committee headed by Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, conducted an official investigation in the months after the raid. Later, several people who were in some way connected with the raid wrote accounts which revealed some of the information that would solve the mysteries surrounding the incident: James Redpath wrote a biography of Brown in 1872; in 1891 Franklin Sanborn collected the letters of John Brown; Richard Hinton wrote a detailed account of the raid in 1894; and Oswald Garrison Villard wrote a biography of Brown in 1910. In 1909, W. E. B. DuBois made the first com-

prehensive study of John Brown, using the material of all the previous Brown studies. Two very recent books about Brown, one by Stephen Oates and one by Barrie Stavis, are the first attempts to go beyond DuBois in describing exactly what happened during the raid, and to uncover Brown's plans for guerrilla warfare in the Allegheny Mountains.

The major sources for this paper are: Louis Ruchames' and Franklin Sanborn's collections of John Brown letters; accounts of the raid by Hinton, Redpath, and the testimony of the Mason Committee of the 36th Congress; the DuBois study; the Provisional Constitution of the raiding party; the books by abolitionists involved in planning the raid—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Franklin Sanborn, and Frederick Douglass; the books published in 1970 by Oates and Stavis; the manuscripts in the Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise at the State of Virginia Library in Richmond; and the John Brown Papers in the Library of Congress.

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JOHN BROWN'S DEVELOPMENT AS AN ABOLITIONIST AND HIS ROLE IN KANSAS

It must be admitted that John Brown was a "peculiar" abolitionist. While other men and women, black and white, worked feverishly for emancipation by speaking, writing, collecting petitions, and assisting runaway slaves, John Brown felt an urgency and a sense of personal responsibility which made him impatient with moral suasion or political campaigns. The source of his impatience can be traced back to his childhood and to his religious experiences as a young man.

John Brown—variously known through his life as "Old Man Brown," "Fighting Brown," "Captain Brown" and "Ossawatomie Brown"—was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut, to Owen Brown and Ruth Mills Brown.[5] His mother died when John was eight, which for a long time was a great heartache to him and made him especially sensitive to the "motherless child." Owen Brown, a tanner of modest means, wrote in his Autobiography: "I am an Abolitionist. I know we are not loved by man. . . ." He operated a station on the Underground Railroad, and passed his hatred of slavery on to his children both by his activities on behalf of the

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[5] Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston, 1891), 7.

slave and by the religious atmosphere which prevailed in their home.[6] John Brown joined the Congregationalist Church in Hudson, Ohio at age 16, and decided during that same time to become a minister, though he was never able to fulfill that goal.[7] He had little formal education, but was an avid reader of the Bible, which he firmly believed was divinely inspired. He "possessed a most unusual memory of its entire contents," and its teachings remained a guide to Brown all his life.[8]

In 1857, a little more than two years before his execution, John Brown wrote a biographical sketch of his youth and sent it to Harry Stearns, the son of George Luther Stearns, a prominent abolitionist who contributed funds for the Harpers Ferry raid. In the sketch Brown recalled a boyhood experience which happened during the War of 1812, when he was 12 years old and driving cattle to the army for his father:

> During the war with England a circumstance occurred that in the end made him a most *determined Abolitionist*: & led him to declare, or *Swear*: Eternal war with Slavery. He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord since a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age very active, inteligent and good feeling; & to whom John was under considerable obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. *The master* made a great pet of John: brought him to table with his first company; & friends; called their attention to every little smart thing he *said or did*: & to the fact of his being more than a hundred miles from home with a company of cattle along; while the *negro boy* (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; *& lodged in cold weather*; & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand. This brought John to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of *Fatherless & Motherless* slave *children*: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect, & provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question *is God* their Father?[9]

John Brown's upbringing had prepared him to recognize the injustice in the situation which he witnessed, but it is noteworthy that he remarked that the Negro boy was "fully if not more than his equal. . . ." In the North there was considerable anti-slavery feeling during the nineteenth century, but race prejudice was rampant, even among some abolitionists. In this respect, John Brown was a remarkable person. Benjamin Quarles commented in

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[6] *Autobiography of Owen Brown*, ibid., 10. Right up until his death, Owen Brown was a deeply concerned abolitionist. In 1856, six weeks before his death, he wrote his son, John, in the Kansas Territory. Owen had collected newspaper clippings on the Kansas struggle and offered to send them to John. The elder Brown was intimately familiar with the problems in Kansas, and he had written his Congressman, Joshua R. Giddings, asking him to support the free-state cause. This letter is in Sanborn, 19-20.

[7] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 14-15.

[8] *John Brown's Autobiography*, in Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 15.

[9] *Ibid.*, 14-15.

Black Abolitionists that: "Brown's relationships with Negroes had been close, continuous, and on a peer basis, a pattern which no other white reformer could boast."[10] Frederick Douglass was impressed from their first meeting by Brown's deeply personal commitment to the slave's cause. He described Brown as a person who, "though a white gentleman, is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery."[11] Brown exhibited a racial egalitarianism that was rare. He shared his pew, his home, and his dinner table with blacks. He was passionate in teaching his children the evils of slavery, and included them in his crusade against it.[12] In 1834, Brown proposed to his family a plan "to get at least one Negro boy or youth, and bring him up as we do our own,"[13] and sometime around 1839 he knelt in prayer with a visiting black preacher and vowed "to make active war upon slavery, and then implored the blessing of God upon "such an undertaking. . . ."[14] He urged his family to join him.

Three observations emerge from a study of John Brown's early life. The first is the depth of his antislavery feelings. He must have conveyed these feelings to Frederick Douglass, for the ex-slave recognized a kindred passion in Brown which ordinarily, and for good reason, only blacks shared. Most white abolitionists had never witnessed the slave system in action, and many were comfortable middle-class people who, though of greatest sincerity, found it difficult to consider even free Negroes their equals. John Brown's approach was entirely different. He had somehow acquired the ability to feel the pain of the slave family, and that pain was unbearable to him. Secondly, Brown's fervent, fundamentalist belief in God prepared him for his no-compromise position on slavery; Brown's was an Old Testament God who was unequivocal in His judgment of right and wrong. The more liberalized religious philosophies had incorporated in their creeds the political and economic processes of nineteenth-century America, which unfortunately included slavery in its Constitution. Thirdly, Brown's youthful encounter with slavery had left him with an overwhelming impression of evil, and his own hardships were to convince him that he, John

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[10] Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 235.
[11] Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, 1881), 125.
[12] Sanford, *op. cit.*, 34-35.
[13] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 236.
[14] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 39; and W.E.B. DuBois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia, 1909), 92. Sanborn says this event took place about 1834; DuBois cites 1839.

Brown, had a duty beyond his own house and family to destroy that evil![15]

The year 1837 marked a turning point in John Brown's life. Prior to that date he had been a successful businessman, running his own tanning business and speculating in land near his home in Hudson, Ohio. By this time he had been married twice and already had a large family. His first wife, Dianthe Lusk Brown, had died in childbirth, that tragically common fate of women in the nineteenth century, and he had married Mary Ann Day in 1833. The depression of 1837 swept away the money which Brown was accumulating for a massive antislavery enterprise. In 1842 he went into bankruptcy, and in September of 1843 he lost four of his children within a week, a heavy loss to a man who loved his family as much as Brown did.[16] These misfortunes led Brown to believe that he could no longer postpone the task he had set before himself—the destruction of slavery. He spent the years between 1842 and 1849 winding up his business affairs, settling his family in the Negro community at North Elba, New York, and organizing in his own mind an anti-slavery raid that would strike a significant blow against the entire slave system.[17] He briefly outlined his plan for such a raid to Frederick Douglass in 1847[18] and in 1849, he studied military fortifications in Europe as he developed his plans further. To suggest that the Harpers Ferry raid was an impulsive, ill-planned, or suicidal endeavor is to ignore the preparations which began ten and twelve years before the raid. John Brown had two criteria for his life's work: (1) it must aim at destroying the entire slave system, and (2) it must be successful. Much thought and planning went into the raid, even as early as the 1840s.

In the meantime, two other anti-slavery projects involved Brown's energies. In 1851, in response to the new Fugitive Slave Law, Brown formed the United States League of Gileadites in Springfield, Massachusetts. Forty-four black men and women pledged to arm and defend themselves against slave catchers, and while there is no evidence that any of them used their weapons, the League was a clear expression of the aggressive attitude Brown had toward slave-holders and was urging others to adopt.[19]

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Bill was passed, allowing settlers

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[15] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 98.
[16] *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown* (New York, 1859), 9.
[17] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 99-104.
[18] Douglass, *op. cit.*, 145.
[19] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 237.

in those two territories to choose to enter the Union as slave or free states. Proslavery settlers were rushing into Kansas to ensure its status as a slave state, and Emigrant Aid Societies in New England were sending free-soilers or free-staters to vote Kansas into the Union as a free state. John Brown urged his sons to settle in Kansas and make a contribution to abolitionism in that way, and five of them migrated in October, 1854, with their meager collective property. Their father declined the trip on the basis that he had another antislavery commitment which he had to pursue.[20]

Upon his arrival in Kansas, John, Jr., wrote home to his father, describing the situation which he and his brothers found. Proslavery men were moving steadily into the territory, armed and determined to establish slavery there; an election on March 30, 1855, had resulted in a proslavery legislature after Missourians forcibly took over the polls. Early in the spring and summer of that year free-staters held their own convention, and refused to obey the laws of the fraudulent legislature (actually two free-state conventions were held, one of abolitionists, and one of those who opposed the entry of any Negroes whatsoever in the state). Missouri newspapers now urged those who had bolstered slavery at the polls to return and 'aid in enforcing laws.' John, Jr., asked his father to send arms and ammunition, if possible, so that the free-staters could defend themselves against the anticipated invasion.[21]

John Brown decided to go to Kansas himself. He felt that there might be important possibilities for a showdown with slavery, and he began contacting abolitionists to raise money for guns. He attended an abolitionist convention in Syracuse, one of his few encounters with the organized antislavery movement. He read the letter from his son to the assemblage, and spoke in his usual fiery manner about the need to defend freedom in Kansas. His request was answered with a donation of $60., most of it from Gerrit Smith.[22]

Brown's request for arms made a considerable impact on the predominantly pacifist antislavery movement. Just as Frederick Douglass had admitted Brown's influence on his own split with Garrisonian nonresistance, other abolitionists who had formerly advocated only peaceful means, now crossed the line and began supporting the use of force. Gerrit Smith and Charles Stearns reversed themselves and came out strongly for the armed defense

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[20] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 126-127.
[21] Letter from John Brown, Jr., to John Brown, in Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 188-190.
[22] James Redpath, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown* (Boston 1860), 81.

of a free Kansas; Wendell Phillips donated money to a Kansas rifle fund, his first contribution to non-peaceful tactics; and Thomas Wentworth Higginson eventually went to Kansas to aid the free-state forces.[23]

John Brown arrived in Kansas on October 6, 1855. He found no organized defense; free-staters were still trying to resist the proslavery laws by noncooperation. Border ruffians were crossing over into Kansas regularly, burning free-state homes, terrorizing and sometimes murdering settlers. Shortly after Brown's arrival, 2,000 Missourians burned and sacked Lawrence, the free-state capital of Kansas. Brown had organized a band for the defense of Lawrence, but arrived too late to prevent the burning. He was distressed that the free-state people in the city had not taken up arms against the Missourians; to him it epitomized the lack of commitment to action which could throw Kansas into the arms of slavery. Within three days of the Lawrence burning, Brown laid and carried out plans for the Pottawatomie executions. He shocked the entire country, but aroused free-staters to fight against slavery.[24]

With a small troop of men, including four of his sons and his son-in-law, Brown went into the "Dutch Henry" proslavery settlement and oversaw the execution of five of the leaders of the raids on free-staters. The men were cut down with swords to avoid arousing the settlement with pistol shots, and the daring and bloodiness of the act at first reviled the free-staters, but had the long-range effect of getting them to organize armed defense of the territory.[25]

Brown had two purposes in the Pottawatomie executions. The first was to stop the raids by border ruffians. To accomplish this he used what can only be called an act of terrorism. The quick, deliberate execution of five men, in the dead of one night, was a successful attempt to frighten other raiders with the unspoken warning: "the same might happen to you one of these nights." The "Dutch Henry" settlement was virtually evacuated after the execu-

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[23] Fredrickson, *op. cit.*, 37-41. Frederick Douglass recorded the influence he felt from Brown. "From this night spent with John Brown in 1847, while I continued to write and speak against slavery, I became less hopeful of its peaceful abolition. My meetings became more and more tinged by the color of this man's strong impressions." *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, 1881), 279.

[24] DuBois *op. cit.*, 154-164.

[25] Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston, 1910), 125-132. Richard Hinton and Franklin Sanborn also published documents which show that the executed men were involved in the attacks on the free-staters, and that the Pottawatomie executions were hardly perpetrated against "innocent people" as Samuel Eliot Morison claims. See Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 251-259; Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men: With Some Account of the Roads They Travelled to Reach Harper's Ferry* (New York, 1894), 61-62; and Morison, *op. cit.*, 591.

tions, and attacks on free-state settlers fell off sharply. Brown wanted secondly to spur the free-staters to organize their own defense, and in this purpose, also, he was successful. So vicious was the ensuing fight between pro and antislavery bands that the federal government was finally forced to intervene and recognize the electoral wishes of the Kansas settlers.[26] "The blow freed Kansas by plunging it into civil war, and compelling men to fight for freedom which they had vainly hoped to gain by political diplomacy."[27]

The Pottawatomie executions have been cited as an example of John Brown's insanity, or at least his villainy. This accusation arises from a contradictory value system which sees "institutionalized violence" as legitimate and individual violence as criminal. Brown executed five men in a military campaign against slavery. The response is shock and he is called insane. But who would ever claim that the men who held three million slaves in bondage were insane? Yet wasn't slavery a systematized form of violence with a questionable stamp of legality on it? The use of violence in a moral or political cause of a minority has long been considered unjustified by those who believe that a democratic nation can resolve its problems fairly and non-violently. But this was clearly not the case in Kansas in 1855.

A pattern developed during John Brown's campaign in Kansas which is important as a precedent to the Harpers Ferry raid. We recognize in John Brown's activities and in his own words that he had one thing singularly on his mind: to end slavery, and by any means necessary. But it is clear that for Brown those means must be practical; they must promise a good chance of success. Brown's role in Kansas proves that as a tactician he was clever and thorough and that he had little of the martyr instinct to die for a cause. Brown was a fighter, not a sufferer; he was willing to die and faced that possibility repeatedly, but his primary goal was to destroy slavery and not to make a symbolic stand against it with his own life. Finally, we see the structure developing which would prevail at Harpers Ferry. Brown organized a small group of people whom he could trust, and worked with that unit in Kansas; many of this group would accompany him to Harpers Ferry. Brown involved his family, of course, since spiritually this was a family matter and because

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[26] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 134-144.

[27] *Ibid.*, 137. After Higginson's visit to Kansas, he reported on what he had found out about the Pottawatomie executions: "I heard no one who did not approve of the act and its beneficial effects were universally asserted. Governor Robinson himself fully endorsing it to me and maintaining like the rest, that it had given an immediate check to the armed oppression of the Missourians." In Howard N. Meyer, *Colonel of the Black Regiment: The Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York, 1967), 125.

practically he was sure of the trust and abilities of his sons. Kansas was to be an important prelude to Harpers Ferry.

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THE HARPERS FERRY RAID AND WHY IT FAILED

It is difficult to trace the origins of a conspiracy—and this is what the preparations for Harpers Ferry were—because everyone involved did his (or her) best to keep the information secret. Even after the Harpers Ferry raid had failed and Brown had been tried and executed, many people were reluctant to reveal their parts in the project, for fear of prosecution. Gerrit Smith was defending himself from allegations regarding the raid as late as 1864, when the Civil War was nearly over and Emancipation declared.[28] But, in order to evaluate the significance of the Harpers Ferry incidents, we must find out what Brown's plans for the raid were. There were many misconceptions about the nature of the attack on the Arsenal, some of which remain to this day. The most serious distortion draws a picture of John Brown and his men madly attempting to take on the entire United States Army in a pitched battle. This is far from the truth of Brown's scheme.

All of Brown's biographers remain unclear as to when the Harpers Ferry raid was first designed, but it seems certain that it was a plan which grew gradually, over a long period of time. As early as 1846, Brown talked about a great plan to liberate large numbers of slaves by deliberately expanding the Underground Railroad traffic.[29] Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote in 1859 that Brown had determined twenty years before that he would go into a slave state and liberate a large number of slaves.[30] Probably Higginson is mistaken about the time; in the late 1830s Brown was already considering an antislavery action of some moment, but his ideas were in the realm of adopting a Negro child or starting a school for Negro youths in Virginia.[31]

Brown became familiar with the country around Harpers Ferry while doing a surveying job in Virginia in 1840 for Oberlin College. At that time he wanted to buy a portion of the Oberlin lands, and had in mind a school for black children which he imagined would become a seminal place for inspiring blacks to claim their freedom.

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[28] Ralph Harlow, *Gerrit Smith* (New York, 1939), 130-133.
[29] Oates, *op. cit.*, 98.
[30] Louis Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader* (New York, 1959), 221.
[31] Oates, *op. cit.*, 62-68.

But Brown never got the land, perhaps because of the financial problems which Oberlin College was facing at that time.[32]

In 1847, Frederick Douglass visited Brown at his home in Springfield, Ohio, and he later recorded in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* the outline of an antislavery plan which Brown confided to him. Brown's plan included no insurrection, but it did involve creating an armed force which would act in the very heart of the South. Brown told Douglass, who at that time subscribed to nonresistance, that he was not adverse to shedding blood if that was required to rid the land of slavery. Brown referred to the Allegheny chain and described a band of about 25 men who would establish themselves in the mountains and make periodic trips to the plantations below to induce slaves to join the band, eventually building their forces to three or four times original size. With this larger group they would begin running off slaves in large numbers, retaining the strongest to increase their fighting force, and helping those who wanted to go North to get in touch with the Underground Railroad. This plan is very similar to the finalized plan which developed between 1857 and 1859, and it is quite possible that, in recalling the conversation, Douglass included elements of the raid itself, rather than of the original conversation.[33] Thomas Thomas, a free Negro who worked for Brown in Springfield, told Franklin Sanborn of a conversation with Brown in 1846 in which Brown suggested a scheme to liberate slaves, but Thomas claimed that until 1851 Brown had been planning to buy land as a slaveholder in the South, employing trusted black men to play the role of his slaves, and using this ruse to agitate among the real slaves.[34]

We see Brown moving gradually over a period of two decades from an educational approach to slave liberation to a direct assault on slavery. Brown called it "carrying the war into Africa," but initially the plan to run slaves off southern plantations was an indefinite idea. Brown was doing research for his plan all during the 1840s and 1850s. While living in Springfield, from 1845 to 1849, he studied maps of the South, Underground Railroad routes, and census tracts to discover where Negroes were living. In 1849 he went to Europe on business and studied military fortifications in England, France, and Germany. James Redpath claims that Brown talked to English abolitionists about his plan and gained considerable

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[32] *Ibid.*, 53-55; and Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood* (New York, 1970), 46-47.

[33] Douglass, *op. cit.*, 271-275.

[34] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 421; and DuBois, *op. cit.*, 101.

sympathy, but no help.[35] Richard Realf, one of Brown's Kansas Company, reported after the raid that Brown had read all the books on insurrectionary warfare that he could lay his hands on; that he had studied Toussaint L'Ouverture's liberation of Haiti and the history of Jamaica.[36] And, beginning with his conversation with Douglass in 1847, Brown purposefully solicited the support of black leaders in the planning and execution of a massive antislavery undertaking.[37]

It was after fighting in Kansas, and after the Pottawatomie executions, that Brown began specifically planning for Harpers Ferry.[38] After his first campaign in Kansas, Brown spent several months of 1857 in the East, speaking and raising money for the free-staters, and also making contacts and collecting money for a slave campaign in the South. Brown's preparations for the raid progressed rather disappointingly. He was having a great deal of trouble raising funds, mainly because the country was in another economic slump and very little money was available for any purpose.[39] In March of 1857, Brown met Hugh Forbes in New York. Forbes was a Briton who had fought with Garibaldi in the abortive Italian revolution of 1848. He expressed interest in joining the Brown raid and declared the firmest of abolitionist ideas. Forbes agreed to serve as drillmaster for the band, and to provide a handbook of tactics to be entitled *Manual of the Patriotic Volunteer*. Brown told Forbes to meet him in Iowa later that year, and authorized a $600.00 advance on his salary which was to be $150.00 a month.[40] Captain Brown made another arrangement for the raid at this time. While speaking and raising money in Collinsville, Connecticut, he contracted with Charles Blair to have 1,000 pikes made. This indicates that the logistics of a major raid were firm enough in his mind for him to spend $1,000 on weaponry at a time when he was very short of money.[41]

Kansas was remarkably quiet when John Brown returned in the summer of 1857, and on October 5, the free-staters won the election which paved the way for Kansas to enter the Union as a free state. The reaction of many of Brown's eastern supporters was to consider the struggle ended; George Luther Stearns withdrew a commitment of

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[35] Reitpath, *op. cit.*, 53-54; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 35; and Villard, *op. cit.*, 285.
[36] Richard Realf, in *The Mason Report*, 36 Congress, 1 Session (1860), 96.
[37] Oates, *op. cit.*, 232-233; Quarles, *op. cit.*, 237; DuBois, *op. cit.*, 98.
[38] Villard, *op. cit.*, 290-291.
[39] Letter from John Brown to John, Jr., April 15, 1857, in Ruchames, *op. cit.*, 112-113.
[40] Villard, *op. cit.*, 295-296; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 146-147.
[41] Charles Blair in *The Mason Report*, 123-129.

$7,000.00 which he had offered to Brown earlier.[42] John Brown realized that little money would be sent to him on the basis of the campaign in Kansas, and he felt that he would have to reveal at least some of his raid plans if he hoped to get the amount he needed. In October he wrote to Franklin Sanborn, practically begging for money. He offered a strong hint of a planned raid, and told Sanborn about the pikes he had ordered.[43] Sanborn was Brown's most ardent eastern supporter, and Brown hoped that he would persuade the others to contribute funds.[44]

At this point another problem was added to Brown's financial difficulties. Forbes and Brown disagreed about the strategy of the raid, though it is unclear what specific differences they had. Both were strong-minded men who found it natural to think of themselves in a leadership position. Forbes resented taking second place to Brown in the campaign, for he envisioned himself another Garibaldi. He returned to the East in November, after only two months in Iowa, and he began stirring up trouble. Forbes wrote to several of Brown's supporters, chastising them for not sending money (and thus depriving Forbes of the salary he needed to feed his allegedly starving family in Paris); and he criticized Brown's capabilities and urged that he, Forbes, replace the old man. For more than a year, Hugh Forbes wrote angry letters and made desperate threats—exposing more and more of the planned raid in hopes of his own gain.[45]

John Brown continued to prepare for the raid which he hoped to execute in the spring of 1858. In November, 1857, Brown gathered together nine men, many of them former members of his Kansas company, at Tabor, Iowa.[46] There they collected all the guns and supplies that had been stored after the Kansas fighting, and set out for Ohio where Brown wanted to set up a school to train the band. In Kansas, Brown had told the men only that he planned another action against proslavery forces, but when they reached Iowa, he said specifically that their ultimate destination was Virginia —with no mention of Harpers Ferry. It is not certain that even he had definitely decided on the place at which the raid would be launched. He hinted to his men that their mission would be slave-

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[42] Oates, *op. cit.*, 217.
[43] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 422.
[44] Oates, *op. cit.*, 217.
[45] Rossen, *op. cit.*, 145-146; Villard, *op. cit.*, 285-287.
[46] *Ibid.*, 302. The nine men with Brown at this point were Charles P. Tidd, Owen Brown, Aaron Stevens, Charles Moffett, Richard Realf, Richardson, Richard Realf, L. F. Parsons, and William Leeman. Tidd, Owen Brown, Stevens and Leeman were the only men from the group that went to Harpers Ferry.

running. Several of the recruits objected to going South; they wanted to continue fighting in Kansas. But Brown was a very persuasive person, and most of the men agreed to follow him to Virginia.[47]

Because of bad weather and lack of money, the group didn't make it to Ohio. They spent the winter at the Quaker community of Springdale, Iowa, and in January Brown prepared to leave to raise money and recruit members in the East. Before going he appointed Aaron Stevens to drill the men and John Kagi to lead political discussions. These were two of his most trusted companions, and with Kagi Brown even discussed the feasibility of launching their attack on slavery at Harpers Ferry. This is the first specific mention of Harpers Ferry that is recorded, and Brown did not make the intended location of the first strike of the raid known to anyone else for some time to come.[48]

Brown left for Andover, Ohio, on January 15, to visit his eldest son. John, Jr. was still upset over the arduous experiences he had had in Kansas, but his father begged him to help with the large expedition now being planned. Brown found it difficult to separate his sons' goals from his own; and with some good reason, since they were all staunch abolitionists like himself. But not all of them had the stamina for the kind of total commitment that ran through every vein of their father's body. Three times before Harpers Ferry we find Brown arguing with one or more of his sons, urging them to participate in his grand plan; three of his sons, Oliver, Watson, and Owen, were with Brown in Virginia. John, Jr. would not actually participate in the raid, but the old man did manage to persuade him to act as an intelligence agent and recruiter, despite the fact that he appeared to be in an agitated state of mind and not able to fulfill the task with the necessary concentration.[49]

From his son's home, "Old Ossawatomie" went to Rochester and hid for a month in Frederick Douglass' house, having discovered that a Federal marshal was on his trail. While at Douglass' home, Brown perfected his plan for the raid, drawing maps and sketches of fortifications and maneuvers. He talked extensively about the raid to Douglass, who promised to solicit aid from northern blacks.[50] Clearly, Brown felt that he was making final preparations for the raid. He wrote each of his main financial supporters—they came

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[47] Ibid., 301; Villard, op. cit., 307-313.

[48] Villard, op. cit., 313.

to be known as the "Secret Six," but at this point they were not actual participants in the conspiracy—and told John, Jr to make a slow trip through Pennsylvania, making acquaintances at Bedford, Chambersburg, Gettysburg, and Uniontown. These contacts would be used to get supplies into Virginia and to get slaves out.[51]

In February and March of 1858, Brown met with the "Secret Six": George L. Stearns, Gerrit Smith, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Theodore Parker, Franklin Sanborn, and Samuel Gridley Howe. Brown told them in considerable detail, about his plan, but he didn't mention Harpers Ferry.[52] Brown also solicited the aid of several prominent black abolitionists: Dr. J. N. Gloucester, J. W. Loguen, William Still, and Henry Highland Garnet, among others. All of these black men gave Brown encouragement, but no concrete arrangements were made for cooperation.[53] As John Brown wound up his preparations, he returned to his North Elba home to enlist the members of his family who had agreed to join him.[54]

The next step for John Brown and his band was a secret convention at Chatham, Ontario, where there was a large Negro settlement. Blacks and whites at the convention adopted a "Provisional Constitution," in preparation for the raid. Why did Brown need a constitution to initiate a slave-running operation? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the raid plan itself. Historians disagree about what Brown's plan actually was, and their differences are closely linked to their own political evaluations of slavery, abolitionism, and direct action. Because not all of the details of the raid plan have been recorded, historians have had to piece together the fragmented information which is available and construct a whole and logical plan. In guiding this process of selection and construction, several facts about Brown are pertinent: (1) He had fought several successful battles in Kansas, so his skill and judgment as a guerrilla fighter were proven. (2) He had spent twenty years of his life developing an idea for the abolition of slavery, and the last five, from 1854 on, had been concentrated specifically on collecting information and devising a plan for a large-scale slave raid. (3) Brown was a very religious man, but in the first half of the nineteenth century this was not unusual, for religious revival and enthusiasm continued during this period throughout the

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[51] Oates, *op. cit.*, 223, 236, 240-241; Villard, *op. cit.*, 414.
[52] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 436-438.
[53] Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 421.
[54] Oates, *op. cit.*, 272-273.

Eastern and Southern states.[55] This evidence, plus the acknowledgement, which I believe to be a political value judgment, that it was reasonable and understandable for someone to despise slavery so much that he determined to see it ended at his own initiative, leads to an understanding of the raid as an action designed to succeed. It is only possible to view the Harpers Ferry raid as an act of madness if one ignores the personal background of John Brown and the potency of antislavery feeling among the more militant abolitionists. It is important to remember that Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson were using force of arms against the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854, and that black abolitionist David Walker had urged the violent destruction of slavery as early as 1829.

John Brown's plan of action had two separate aspects. The attack on Harpers Ferry was only the first part of the raid, and Brown had three purposes in launching the campaign in this way. First, he needed weapons, which were abundantly available at the Arsenal. Second, he needed a way to alert slaves throughout the South that an earnest attack on slavery had begun, so that they could be prepared to join him when the time came. Third, he needed to alert his Northern supporters that the campaign was under way, so they could send men and supplies to him. Brown planned to stay in Harpers Ferry just long enough to accomplish those three missions, then he and his band would retreat into the mountains behind the Arsenal.[56]

Once in the mountains, Brown planned to set up a camp with the small group of men which he had with him. The best of them would be sent down at night to plantations in the area to encourage slaves to join them in the mountains. He needed black men or women for this part of the plan, for he was well aware that slaves were realistically suspicious of whites; only blacks would have any success in persuading slaves to leave their masters and come to the mountains to fight slavery. When the mountain band had recruited sufficient numbers, Brown would begin branching out in smaller groups, extending the camps southward along the Allegheny chain. Naturally he would be able to loot more plantations of their slaves, and at this point he would begin bringing slaves into the mountains who would then continue on to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Brown and his company would live on what they

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[55] W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 55-60.
[56] Stavis, *op. cit.*, 182.

could confiscate from the plantations and whatever could be supplied by Northern and Southern supporters.

It is valuable to look back at the Missouri raid on December 20 and 21, 1858, as a prototype of what Brown had in mind for Virginia. "Ossawatomie Brown" led a double column of men to the homes of two Missouri planters, where several slaves were captured and along with livestock and other confiscated property, taken to Canada. One planter, who resisted the raiders, was killed by Aaron Stevens against Brown's orders and desires. But there was no massacre or attempt at pillage. So it was to be in the South. Slaves would be removed from the plantations during the night, with no bloodshed unless the planters made the mistake of resisting or chasing the band.[57]

Once in the mountains, Brown's knowledge of guerrilla warfare would be put to use. John Kagi showed Richard Hinton the plans drawn by Brown for the mountain forts: "They were to be used in ravines or 'draws' when so situated that passage from one to another could be made. It was intended to conceal them by trees and thickets, place them on hillsides, and otherwise arrange them as ambuscades." The mountains would provide an inaccessible cover where a small number of men could hold off a much larger force.[58]

Some historians have imagined Brown collecting slaves into a vast mountain settlement of black men and women, but Brown did not envision this happening. He felt that the raids would have a more profound affect on slavery than just the liberation of individual slaves. The massive and consistent raids on plantations in one county of Virginia would undermine the security of all slave property in the state, causing planters to sell their slaves South. Brown's band would follow, of course, and as slaves and raiders moved further south, it would become increasingly clear to slave owners that slave property was of little value, because it could not be protected. This fact, and not a bloody confrontation, would force slave owners to end slavery. There would be groups of planters who would resist losing their slaves, and Brown was willing to fight it out with them if necessary. But he would clearly have the advantage in his mountain retreat against any pursuing forces.[59]

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[57] The details of the raid plan are compiled from the following accounts: Kagi's discussion with Hinton, in Redpath, op. cit., 205-208; Higginson in *Cheerful Yesterdays* (Boston, 1898), 230-231; Rocherton, op. cit., 125; Douglass, op. cit., 279-282; Oates, op. cit., 276-281; Barlow, op. cit., 405; Slavin, op. cit., 141-152; Hinton, op. cit., 260; Richard Kagi's account in Sanborn, op. cit., 156-157; DuBois, op. cit., 276; *The Mason Report*, 80-115; Villard, op. cit., 427-440.

[58] Hinton, op. cit., 25.

[59] Redpath, op. cit., 205-208.

For Brown there were advantages in his plan which justified his enthusiasm for the raid. Brown believed, and there is considerable evidence for it, that an explosive slave rebellion was inevitable. Even if slaves could be restrained and such a rebellion subdued, the prospects of civil war were in the air. Brown felt that bloodshed over slavery was inevitable, and he was determined to organize or coordinate a slave rebellion in such a way that the killing was held to a minimum. His daughter, Ann Brown Adams, who had been present with the raiders in Maryland up until a week before the raid, told Richard Hinton of her father: "He expected. . .that if they (the slaves) had intelligent white leaders that they would be prevailed on to rise and secure their freedom without revenging their wrongs, and with very little bloodshed. . . ."[60]

Brown wanted an "orderly" revolution, and he felt that this would be possible through a guerrilla campaign. Brown's plan involved maintaining a large number of men and women in the mountains, some of them permanent members of the antislavery force, others on their way to the North. Brown realized that this transient mountain community could only survive and work together if there were discipline and some form of government. This is what was developed at the Chatham Convention. The "Provisional Constitution" which emerged from the convention was a document with 48 articles, providing officers for the raiding party and guiding its actions in the mountains. The document refutes any suggestion that Brown was bloodthirsty. One of its main purposes was to avoid unnecessary bloodshed and to maintain honorable conduct among all the members of the mountain-dwelling group.[61]

What were the chances of success for the attack on slavery which John Brown had engineered? Once we recognize that Brown was planning an extensive guerrilla campaign, the wisdom of the endeavor becomes more discernible. Two of the men who were intimate with the raid plans testified to their soundness. Samuel Gridley Howe, who had fought in Greece and was considered an expert on guerrilla warfare, thought the scheme was a good one.[62] James Redpath wrote after the raid: "Harpers Ferry, by the admission of military men, was admirably chosen as the spot at which to begin a war of liberation. The neighboring mountains. . .would afford to guerrilla forces a protection the most favorable, and a thousand

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[60] Hinton, *op. cit.*, 268.
[61] "Provisional Constitution," in the *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise.*
[62] Oates, *op. cit.*, 237.

opportunities for a desperate defense or rapid retreats before overwhelming numbers of an enemy."[63] DuBois, having studied in depth the circumstances of Brown's action, agreed with this analysis: "In truth it need not have failed. History and military science prove its essential soundness."[64]

A study of the map of the area around Harpers Ferry shows the substantial possibility of success, once John Brown got out of Harpers Ferry. A hard climb of an hour or two would have taken Brown and his men to safety in the foothills of the Alleghenies. Another few hours and they would have been in the mountain wilderness where caves, deep ravines and natural fortresses would have allowed the men almost impenetrable cover. On the basis of Brown's past experience in Kansas and his extensive knowledge of guerrilla warfare, it is safe to say that he would have been able to operate quite adeptly in this situation.[65]

Brown could have counted on aid from two probable sources of support, once in the mountains. The first was among the slaves living in the area under attack. There are several pieces of information which indicate that slaves were ready to participate in a coordinated assault on slavery. During the year before the raid, Brown sent George B. Gill, one of his band, to visit a black man named Mr. Reynolds. Reynolds told Gill of a military organization of black men and women, with ramifications through most, or nearly all, of the slave states. Reynolds had been through the South himself, visiting and organizing. He told Gill of the many references in Southern newspapers to this or that favorite slave being killed or found dead, and claimed that these were slaves who had been discovered as leaders of liberation plots. Reynolds said the blacks were only waiting for Brown, or someone else, to make a successful initiative move, then their forces would be put into motion.[66]

There is evidence that several slaves from the Harpers Ferry area did participate in the raid itself, but once it became certain that failure awaited the enterprise, they returned hastily to their plantations to escape discovery.[67] DuBois feels that more slaves would have been involved except for the fact that Brown had to start the raid ahead of schedule because he feared exposure of the plan.[68] Other facts prove the support which slaves were willing to

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[63] Reinert, *op. cit.*, 246.
[64] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 345.
[65] Boyer, *op. cit.*, 36.
[66] Hinton, *op. cit.*, 732-733.
[67] Boyer, *op. cit.*, 35.
[68] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 345.

offer at great risk. Several incendiary fires broke out around Harpers Ferry in the week after the raid which it seems certain were set by slaves and free Negroes.[69] DuBois confirms black participation in the events around the raid by referring to Richard Hinton's estimate that $10,000,000.00 was lost in the sale of Virginia slaves in the year 1859.[70] Census figures substantiate the removal of slaves from the Harpers Ferry region: Between 1850 and 1860 the black population of Maryland and Virginia increased by about 4 per cent. But in Loudoun and Jefferson counties in Virginia, and Washington County in Maryland—the three counties surrounding Harpers Ferry, there was a decrease of nearly 10 per cent in the black population.[71]

Another important source of support for the raid was the white mountain population of the region where Brown hoped to establish his base. Barrie Stavis, in *John Brown: The Sword and the Word* has added this analysis to the understanding of Brown's strategy. The Southern mountain people, though white, had little else in common with the wealthy plantation owners of the South. The two groups were separated by class, and also by religious and ethnic backgrounds. The mountain folk were, for the most part, Scotch-Irish in descent, belonging to the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. The plantation owners, who were predominantly Anglican, had used their great wealth to disinherit their mountain counterparts economically and politically, and referred to them derogatorily as hillbillies and crackers.[72]

During the Civil War many poor mountain farmers disclosed their political allegiance by opposing secession and remaining loyal to the Union. Western Virginia separated from Virginia to form a Union state, and the eastern portion of Tennessee tried unsuccessfully to follow suit. The illiterate backwoodsman could see little in the war to his benefit. Some mountaineers were distinctly out of sympathy with the cause of slavery; others resented having to fight for a cause which served the interests of the wealthy, many of whom used their money to avoid the draft.[73]

In the mountains of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama, secret societies were established to agitate for peace and a return to the Union. They not only discouraged men from enlisting in the Confederate Army, but also

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[69] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Andrew Hunter to Wise, Richmond, Virginia, November 16, 1859; Telegram from J. Lucius Davis to Wise, Richmond, November 18, 1859.

[70] Hinton, *op. cit.*, 325-326.

[71] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 254.

[72] Cash, *op. cit.*, 5-60, and Stavis, *op. cit.*, 98-99.

[73] Ellis Lore, *Dissension During the Civil War* (New York, 1928), 3-5.

encouraged desertion; they opposed Confederate conscription laws and urged men to join the Union Army.[74] When the first conscript law was passed, Southern unionists retreated to the mountains of eastern Tennessee. The migration was well organized, and pilots led the refugees to places of safety or to the Federal Army, if they wished to fight.[75]

The mountain people were angered by the provision in the conscript law which allowed a conscriptee to purchase a substitute or provide 20 slaves in place of his service. The substitution system disclosed to the masses of Southern people the power of capital, and the inequities were all too clear:

> They must go into the ranks while their neighbors who happened to be blessed with money could hire substitutes; they must give their blood while men of property must give only of their possessions. The inequality produced gave much poignancy to the slogan of the mountains: 'the rich man's war and the poor man's fight.'[76]

It was estimated that by 1863 one-half of the soldiers from the northeastern counties of Georgia were hiding in the mountains. The Confederate War Office went so far as to declare that: "The condition of things in the mountain districts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama menaces the existence of the Confederacy as fatally as either of the armies of the United States."[77] This was precisely the area in which Brown intended to operate, and his hopes of winning the mountain people over to his side are reflected in several articles of the "Provisional Constitution" which deal specifically with the relationship between the antislavery bands and the nonslaveholding Southern population.[78] Brown expected mountain people would assist him by scouting, tending the sick and wounded, providing food, and concealing the presence of his forces; and he also hoped that some would join his army. It appears that those hopes were firmly based.[79]

Brown's plan was well-designed and his chances of success seemed good. Why, then, did the raid fail? Several specific problems arose after the Chatham Convention which disrupted the schedule

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[74] Lonn, *op. cit.*, 62.
[75] Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill, 1934), 150.
[76] Albert Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (New York, 1924), 49-50.
[77] Lonn, *op. cit.*, 25.
[78] "Provisional Constitution," *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise.*
[79] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise.* Lawrence Thatcher of Memphis, Tennessee, to John Brown, October 3, 1859. Thatcher wrote to Brown that he had been touring the South and had found considerable antislavery sentiment among the nonslaveholding white population, especially in Arkansas and Tennessee. He urged Brown to launch his raid in one of those two states, apparently unaware that he had already chosen to begin at Harpers Ferry.

and proceedings which Brown had organized. Richard Realf revealed to the Mason Committee that Brown had originally planned to begin the raid in June of 1858.[60] One of the circumstances which prevented that was Hugh Forbes' activities in the East after he left Brown in Iowa in the fall of 1857. Forbes wrote to several abolitionists, complaining about Brown and revealing the most confidential details of the raid quite indiscriminately.[61] Theodore Parker and Samuel Gridley Howe were appalled that this information was being extended in an unknown number of letters and verbal tirades, and they insisted that Brown call the raid off temporarily. Thomas Higginson and John Brown both wanted to take the risk of continuing with the original plans, hoping that Forbes hadn't done any real damage. Brown told Higginson that postponement would be difficult and hindersome:

> he. . .considered delay very discouraging to his thirteen men, and to those in Canada. . . .The knowledge that Forbes could give of his plan would be injurious for he wished his opponents to underrate him; but still. . .the increased terror produced would perhaps counterbalance this. . . .If he had the means he would not lose a day. He complained that some of his Eastern friends were not men of action. . .that they magnified the obstacles. Still, it was essential that they should not think him reckless, he said; and as they held the purse, he was powerless without them. . . .[62]

There was nothing for Brown to do but conceal the arms he had collected, scatter the men who had gathered at Chatham, and hide out in Kansas until the Forbes incident was forgotten. DuBois says: "It was a bitter necessity and it undoubtedly helped ruin the success of the foray. The Negroes in Canada fell away from the plan when it did not materialize and doubted Brown's determination and wisdom."[63]

Another reason the raid was delayed was lack of funds. Brown had great difficulty raising the money he needed, and he became irritated at what he considered a lack of commitment on the part of his Eastern abolitionist friends.[64] Finally, in August of 1859, although he still didn't have as much money as he felt he needed, Brown began moving his company to the Harpers Ferry area. He rented the Kennedy farmhouse about five miles outside the town in

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[60] *The Mason Report*, 109. Realf was a member of Brown's band at the Chatham Convention and was designated as Secretary of State under the Provisional Constitution. He went to the East to keep an eye on Hugh Forbes, and then went on to England, apparently to raise money for the raid. He did not return in time to be at Harpers Ferry, but he did appear before the Mason Committee. Oates, *op. cit.*, 251 and 359.

[61] Reinpath, *op. cit.*, 187; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 145-146.

[62] Higginson in Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 463-464.

[63] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 270.

[64] Richard Realf in *The Mason Report*, 109.

Maryland, pretending to be a farmer. He got his 15-year-old daughter, Ann, and his 17-year-old daughter-in-law, Martha, to stay at the farm to give the scene a more familial look to the neighbors. The raiders who stayed there hid in the loft of the house most of the time, coming out only at night to stretch their legs and get some fresh air.[85]

It was not until this point that Brown announced to the other men his intention to attack the Harpers Ferry Arsenal as a way of getting more guns and as a dramatic incident to announce the commencement of the antislavery campaign. "Even his own sons did not regard it as a wise or practicable step."[86] A warm discussion of the idea ensued, and one of the band, Charles Tidd, was so angry that he left the farm for a while to cool off. Brown offered to resign as leader of the group, but the other men insisted that they needed his guidance. Charles Tidd, in an interview with Higginson on February 10, 1860, said: "Finally when they consented, it was with the agreement that men would be sent in each direction to burn bridges."[87] This, however, was not done. Tidd was one of the five men who escaped after the raid, and he told Higginson that he still endorsed Brown's general project and felt it could have been a success. But Tidd considered the attack on Harpers Ferry too risky, and believed it never should have been attempted.

Throughout the fall Brown had been planning to initiate the raid on October 24, but by the second week in October he was worried about the suspicions of neighbors. A woman who lived near by had walked into the house when all of the men were down from the loft eating dinner, and everyone knew that she was curious about what was going on and thought that they were running slaves, since several of the men in the house were black. So, on October 15, Brown announced that they would strike the next evening. The men in the house were prepared to move, in fact they were quite restless, but several of the band hadn't arrived yet. Also, the slaves in the area were anticipating the raid later in the month, and were caught off guard when it happened on the 16th.[88]

Once the raid began, two tactical errors were made which may have been the cause of the defeat. On the morning of the 17th, a Baltimore and Ohio train came through Harpers Ferry and was stopped by some of Brown's men. Brown insisted that the train

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85 Villard, op. cit., 405-407.
86 Mrs. Ann Brown Adams in Huston, op. cit., 254.
87 Higginson, op. cit., 226-228.
88 Redpath, op. cit., 243-244.

be allowed to go through; he expressed his concern about the passengers and the friends and relatives that were awaiting them. But, when the train reached Baltimore, the occupants naturally informed the authorities about what seemed to be going on at Harpers Ferry, and this led eventually to the Marines being sent from Washington, D.C.[89]

Another problem arose when Charles Tidd and Osborne Anderson didn't return to the town with the wagon full of guns from the Kennedy farmhouse. It is not quite clear what detained them, but by the time they got back to Harpers Ferry, the other men were surrounded in the fire engine house, and there was no way to save the expedition. Several of the raiders had urged Brown to leave the town and to retreat into the mountains while there was still time. But Brown insisted on waiting for the weapons from the farmhouse, and by then he was unable to move. DuBois thinks that it is possible that Tidd dallied on purpose, since he disapproved of Brown's plan.[90]

Twice Brown tried to exchange the several hostages he had collected for the freedom of the raiders, but his offer wasn't accepted. Finally, on Tuesday morning, October 18, the U.S. Marines broke down the door to the engine house, and one of the officers, Lieutenant Green, beat Brown to the ground, senseless.[91] The military campaign ended there, in defeat, with ten of the raiders dead. But a new campaign began. John Brown's sword was broken, but the words he spoke so fearlessly in the weeks to come proved even stronger. Brown won the respect of his enemies because of "the manner chiefly in which he has acted since his capture, and during his trial," one opponent of the raid wrote. "History does not contain a parallel for such noble, chivalric, heroic yet modest learning."[92] The story of the Harpers Ferry raid was the first major event to be carried across the nation by telegraph wires; soon the whole world knew that a war against slavery had begun. The affect was profound and spelled, in many ways, the beginning of the end for the South's "peculiar institution."

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[89] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 313; *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress, Telegram from the mayor of Frederick, Maryland to Henry A. Wise, October 17, 1859.

[90] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 314-318.

[91] Hinton, *op. cit.*, 306-307.

[92] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, M. McMahon of Albany, New York, November 1, 1859. McMahon began his letter by stating his lack of sympathy for the Harpers Ferry raid.

ABOLITIONIST SUPPORT FOR THE HARPERS FERRY RAID

In seeking evidence that John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry was a reasonable plan of action, it is important to consider the support that Brown had from respected and well-known abolitionists, both black and white. Brown had never been very involved in the organized abolitionist movement.[93] Herbert Aptheker says that there is some evidence that Brown contributed to the printing of David Walker's Appeal, and he attended some antislavery meetings, but his contact with the abolitionist movement was limited and sporadic.[94] However, he had many contacts with individual abolitionists, and actively sought their aid for both Kansas and Harpers Ferry. The degree of support he got for such militant action is significant. There were many people who didn't think that John Brown was the least bit insane, and they were willing to put their money and other resources behind his efforts.

The prominent black figures who were sought out by Brown included Martin R. Delany, Jermain W. Loguen, Henry Highland Garnet, William Still, and Charles H. Langston.[95] Brown contacted Jermain Loguen in February of 1858, and Loguen wholeheartedly supported Brown's plot and agreed to recruit blacks in his area "who would go to war." Dr. and Mrs. J. N. Glouchester of New York also talked with Brown that month, and pledged to do all they could to organize the support of New York's 15,000 blacks behind Brown's efforts.[96] At this time Brown was expecting to initiate the raid in the spring of that year, but the long delay made it impossible for him to give the Glouchesters and Loguen any more of the details they needed to recruit blacks for the raid.

Martin R. Delany helped Brown set up the Chatham Convention and served as its chairman. The convention included 34 Negroes, most of them from Ontario's population, which Delany and Loguen had recruited. Many of the blacks from Canada signed up to join Brown in Virginia, but, once, again, the delay meant that Brown lost contact with most of these men, and only Osborne Anderson represented the Canadian blacks at Harpers Ferry.[97]

The black person that Brown probably felt closest to was Frederick Douglass. Brown had great admiration for Douglass, and

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[93] Meyer, *op. cit.*, 140-141.
[94] Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry* (New York, 1965), 39.
[95] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 227.
[96] Oates, *op. cit.*, 233-235.
[97] Starkey, *op. cit.*, 72; Quarles, *op. cit.*, 238-239; DuBois, *op. cit.*, 258; Villard, *op. cit.*, 330-332; Rodgers, *op. cit.*, 230-237; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 170-190.

he confided more information about the raid to him than to anyone else. Douglass' attitude toward Brown seems ambiguous. Brown had influenced Douglass' move away from nonviolent abolitionism, but when Brown was hiding in Douglass' house in 1858, the ex-slave said he found Brown's constant discussion of the planned raid "boring." Brown very much wanted Douglass to be involved in the Harpers Ferry raid, and the two met in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, on August 19-21, 1859, where Brown told Douglass that he planned to take the Arsenal. Douglass was dismayed, and urged Brown not to walk into "a perfect steel-trap." Brown insisted that Harpers Ferry could be captured, and begged Douglass to join him. "Come with me, Douglass," he pleaded; "I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them." Douglass refused to go, but Shields Green, a runaway slave who was with Douglass, decided to join the raiders.[98]

After the raid, Douglass felt he had to flee the country, because the South was anxious to implicate him in the incident and hang him with the others.[99] While in jail, Brown expressed to Judge and Mrs. Thomas B. Russell, abolitionists from Boston, some bitter feelings toward Douglass for not participating in the raid.[100] While each of these men had a deep hatred of slavery, and both were totally committed to its abolition, they saw their roles in different ways, and each was determined to pursue what he felt to be most important.[101]

Harriet Tubman was to have joined the raid, but illness prevented her from getting to Harpers Ferry. The five black men who did participate in the raid—John A. Copeland, Osborne P. Anderson, Shields Green, Lewis Leary, and Dangerfield Newby—were ample proof that blacks did support the raid and were willing to fight beside Brown.[102]

Many white abolitionists aided Brown in various ways, also. The most important of these was the group of men who came to be known as the "Secret Six." They are considered Brown's main financial backers for the Harpers Ferry raid, and the group in-

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[98] Douglass, *op. cit.*, 271-275 and 318-321.

[99] DuBois, *op. cit.*, 281 and 344; *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Southern Merchant of the City of New York, to Wise, October 24, 1859. This is one of several letters which Wise received, urging him to prosecute and hang Northern abolitionists especially Douglass, for the Harpers Ferry raid.

[100] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 242.

[101] Letter to the Rochester *Democrat and American* from Frederick Douglass, postmarked Canada West, October 31, 1859, printed in Philip Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1950) 460-462.

[102] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 237-240; DuBois, *op. cit.*, 280-282.

cluded some of New England's foremost abolitionists. Gerrit Smith was a member of Congress from New York, a millionaire and a philanthropist; he had donated a large tract of land for Negro settlement, which also enabled blacks to vote as property owners. Theodore Parker was a Unitarian minister, an orator, master of 20 languages, and the owner of a library of 16,000 volumes; he had played a prominent role in Boston in resisting the Fugitive Slave Law, hiding fugitive slaves in his house and encouraging them to defend themselves with guns. Franklin B. Sanborn was an educator and a teacher, and after the raid he wrote an important biography of Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown.* Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe was a physician who had fought with Garibaldi; he founded the Massachusetts School for the Blind and was the co-editor of an abolitionist newspaper along with his wife, Julia Ward Howe. George Luther Stearns was a wealthy merchant and philanthropist. Thomas Wentworth Higginson was a Unitarian minister from Worcester, Massachusetts, who had joined Parker in the struggle against the capture of fugitive slaves in the Boston area; he went to Kansas in 1856 to evaluate the situation of the free-state forces and to see what kind of aid they needed. Higginson implied, in *Cheerful Yesterdays,* that he would have gone to Harpers Ferry with Brown if the raid hadn't been delayed.[103]

Higginson and Sanborn were the leading figures in the "Secret Six," and Brown relied heavily on them to keep the other men interested in the project and to solicit funds from them. In March of 1858, two months before the Chatham Convention, after repeated consultation with Brown and with each other, the men decided to work together as a secret committee to advise Brown and raise $1,000 for him. By May of 1858, however, the group had raised more than $4,000.00, money that was used to sustain Brown's group through the long delay from the spring of 1858 to the summer of 1859. None of the "Secret Six" knew where Brown intended to strike; they had asked him not to implicate them with that information, in case something went wrong with the raid. After Brown's capture, several of these men were accused of aiding him, and the Southern authorities were anxious to prosecute them for their involvement with Brown. Samuel Howe and George Stearns were called before the Mason Committee which investigated the raid, though no concrete evidence could be charged against them. Andrew Hunter,

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[103] Boyle, *op. cit.*, 58; Harlow, *op. cit.*, 410-430; Higginson, *op. cit.*, 223; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 117.

the prosecuting attorney in the Harpers Ferry case, wanted at least one of the raiders tried in Federal court so that he could summon certain Northern abolitionists and prove their complicity, but this was never done.[104]

Other well-known abolitionists supported Brown in various ways, also. Lydia Maria Childs, the abolitionist author, wrote to Brown in jail and offered to care for his wounds; he wrote back that she could be of more service to him by aiding his family.[105] John Quincy Adams wrote to Governor Wise of Virginia, castigating him for participating in the scheduled hanging of Brown: "Can you sit as the chief magistrate of that *once* patriotic state, bow yourself before this Moloch, while the blood of liberty is dropping from the Declaration of Independence as it is borne aloft in the talons of the American Eagle." Amos A. Lawrence, a well-known Boston lawyer, wrote to Wise twice, urging him to give Brown a fair trial.[106]

Henry D. Thoreau had known and admired John Brown before the raid, and had contributed some money to him, but he knew nothing of the plans for Harpers Ferry. When news of the raid reached Concord, Thoreau immediately wrote a eulogy of Brown called "A Plea for Captain John Brown." He read the eloquent speech in Concord and Boston, although he faced considerable opposition, even from other abolitionists. Thoreau was the first person to make a public statement praising the raid as a meritorious act, calling it "the best news America has ever had." For the rest of his life he considered Brown a true Transcendentalist, a man who followed the voice within him even though it led him into battle with the state.[107]

Ralph Waldo Emerson shared Thoreau's enthusiasm for the raid, for many of the same reasons. He wrote that "John Brown was an idealist. He believed in his ideas to that extent that he existed to put them all into action."[108] William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, initially referred to the raid as the "well-intended but sadly misguided effort of Captain John Brown." But even Garrison, a dedicated pacifist, endorsed the raid in a speech at Tremont Temple in Boston on the day of Brown's execution. Garri-

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[104] *The Mason Report*, 225-245, 156-175; DuBois, *op. cit.*, Of the Secret Six, only Stearns publicly announced his support of Brown during the investigation.

[105] Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures and Letters*, (Boston, 1884) 287-288; *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Andrew Hunter to Wise, November 2, 1859.

[106] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Letter to Wise from John Quincy Adams (no date); letter to Wise from Amos A. Lawrence, Boston, October 26, 1859.

[107] Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston, 1893,) 420-441; Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York, 1965), 415-426.

[108] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Miscellanies* (Boston, 1893), 208.

son pointed out that he was a nonresistant who had labored for over twenty-eight years to bring about the peaceful abolition of slavery. "Yet, as a peace man—I am prepared to say: 'Success to every slave insurrection at the South, and in every slave country.' And I do not see how I compromise or stain my peace profession in making that declaration. . . .Rather than see men wearing their chains in a cowardly and servile spirit, I would, as an advocate of peace, much rather see them breaking the head of the tyrant with their chains. Give me, as a nonresistant, Bunker Hill and Lexington, and Concord, rather than the cowardice and servility of a Southern slave-plantation."[109]

Wendell Phillips was one of the most influential of the abolitionist speakers in 1859, and after the raid he gave a speech in Henry Ward Beecher's church in Brooklyn on "The Lesson of the Hour." Phillips also recognized the importance of what John Brown had done and eloquently portrayed it to his audience:

> Harper's Ferry is the Lexington of today. . . .Suppose he did fail. . . .There are two kinds of defeat. Whether in chains or in laurels, *Liberty* knows nothing but victories. Soldiers call Bunker Hill a defeat; but Liberty dates from it, though Warren lay dead on the field. . . .Virginia did not tremble at an old gray-headed man at Harper's Ferry; they trembled at a John Brown in every man's own conscience. . . .Insurrection was a harsh, horrid word to millions a month ago. John Brown went a whole generation beyond it, claiming the right for the white man to help the slave to freedom by arms.[110]

Support for John Brown grew while he was in jail. Brown received letters from all over the country, offering encouragement, sending money, and praising the old man for his courage. One man even offered to hang in Brown's place. Letters poured in to Governor Wise, asking that Brown be pardoned or that he not be hanged. There were even indications that there was some white Southern support for Brown. Wise also received letters threatening his life, promising that he would be killed as the South "burned down," if Brown were executed. Many people wanted to see Brown rescued, and at least one rescue attempt was planned, but John Brown felt that he could do more good for the antislavery cause by hanging, so he discouraged any attempt at freeing him.[111]

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[109] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, October 28, 1859 article in the Boston *Liberator*, "Garrison's View of the Harper's Ferry Movement"; Wendell Phillips Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston, 1889), 491-492.

[110] Phillips, *op. cit.*, 274-288.

[111] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*; "Wil" to John Brown, from New York, November 29, 1859; S. C. Sigourney, Boston, to Wise, December 17, 1859; Merrit Haynes, Massachusetts, to Wise, November 22, 1859; an unsigned letter from Cincinnati Negroes to Wise, November 19, 1859; Samuel Adams, Boston, to Wise, November

Many people expressed their hatred of Brown also, during the time he spent in jail. But the point to be made here is that thousands of Brown's contemporaries took him and his action seriously. There were charges of insanity directed at him, and letters were sent to Wise urging him to grant Brown clemency on the grounds of insanity. But these were from people who did not feel a deep commitment to ending slavery. One man who had known Brown for some time wrote, "very soon he began to talk with great earnestness of the evil of slavery on which he very soon became enthusiastic and claimed that any course, whether stealing or coaxing niggers to run away from their masters was honorable." The use of the term "nigger" disqualifies that man from any judgment of *Brown's* sanity, since his own political values were so different.[112] None of the abolitionists charged Brown with being crazy, because all of them could understand the political perspective of the raid. Once the basic principle of the *necessity* of abolishing slavery was agreed upon, it became impossible to dismiss Brown simply as a madman. For, as Garrison, the greatest pacifist of them all, was willing to admit, history had proven moral suasion to be insufficient, and violence became the justifiable last resort for men and women who could not accept the continued existence of slavery in the United States.

It should also be remembered, in evaluating Brown's support for the raid, that twenty-one other men joined him at Harpers Ferry. Their participation in the raid also justifies to the convincing nature of Brown's plan.

Osborn Perry Anderson was a free-born Pennsylvania Negro who met Brown in Canada. He was 24 years old and a printer by trade. Anderson escaped from Harpers Ferry and, eluding capture, he wrote an account of the raid, and later fought in the Civil War. Shields Green was an escaped slave from South Carolina who was known as "Emperor." He was about 24 years old and a friend of Frederick Douglass. Green was captured in the engine house and executed in 1860. John A. Copeland was a 22-year-old black man, a carpenter by trade, who had been born of free Negro parents in North Carolina, reared in Oberlin and educated at Oberlin College.

23, 1859; "Boston Fireman," to Wise, November 15, 1859; Charles F. Hill, New York, to Wise, November 8, 1859; J. C. McKie, Boston, to Wise, November 23, 1859; M. R. Weatherall, Mississippi, to Wise, November 28, 1859; William Mason, Providence, to Wise, November 12, 1859; Alfred M. Barbour, Harpers Ferry, telegram to Wise, October 26, 1859; George L. Lacombe, St. Paul, Minnesota, to Wise, November 12, 1859. Lacombe was the man who asked to be hanged in Brown's place.

[112] Affidavit of S. M. Gondale, November 17, 1859, from the *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress.

He was captured trying to escape across the Shenandoah, and almost lynched. Saved from lynching, he was executed in 1860. Dangerfield Newby was 30 years old, a free Negro from the Harpers Ferry area. He had a wife and seven children in slavery, and he participated in the raid partly in hopes of freeing his family. Lewis Sherrard Leary was a former slave from North Carolina, and the uncle of John Copeland. Leary was killed trying to escape across the Shenandoah.

Five members of Brown's family joined the raid, three sons and two brothers of his eldest daughter's husband, William and Dauphin Thompson. Oliver Brown was 20 years old and had just been married. He was shot and killed in the engine house on Monday night. Watson Brown, 25, was shot as he left the engine house under a flag of truce to investigate what had happened to William Thompson. The Thompsons were neighbors of the Browns' in North Elba, and the two families were very close. William Thompson, 26, was captured when he left the engine house under a flag of truce. After another raider shot and killed Mayor Beckham, an infuriated mob dragged William from the Wager House down to the river and murdered him. His brother, Dauphin, was killed by the Marines during the assault on the engine house.

Several of the raiders had come from Kansas. Stewart Taylor, who was about 21, was killed as he fought from the engine house. Jeremiah Anderson, 26, from Indiana, had fought with a guerrilla company in Kansas and met Brown there. Some question has been raised as to his race; DuBois claims that he was black. He was killed during the assault on the engine house, run through with a Marine bayonet. William H. Leeman was 20 years old, one of the two youngest members of the party, and he had also been in the Kansas fighting. Leeman tried to escape across the Potomac River on Monday, but was caught and shot at point-blank range. Albert Hazlett, in his 20's, was another member of the Kansas band. He escaped across the Potomac in a small boat, but was caught in Pennsylvania, returned to Virginia, and executed in 1860.

Four men played especially important parts in the raid. John Henry Kagi, 24, was Secretary of War in Brown's provisional government. He had a good English education and had been a newspaper reporter in Kansas, where he earnestly tried to help the free-state cause. He was killed as he tried to escape across the Shenandoah River from Hall's Rifle Works. John E. Cook, 29, an adventurer from Connecticut, had lived and married in Harpers

Ferry, was Brown's advance man or spy. He was sent from the town back to the farmhouse to help with the arms. After the raid, he tried to escape through Pennsylvania, but was captured, and tried and executed in 1860. Aaron Stevens, discharged from the U. S. Army after beating up an officer in Mexico, gained extensive experience in guerrilla warfare in Kansas where he fought under the name of Colonel Whipple. Twenty-eight at the time of the raid, he was badly wounded under a flag of truce, but survived to stand trial and was executed in 1860. Charles P. Tidd, 27, who had fought in Kansas, returned to the Maryland side of the Potomac to get guns from the farmhouse, and failed to get back to Harpers Ferry. His failure to complete his mission has been cited as one reason for the failure of the raid.

Two brothers, Edwin and Barclay Coppoc, both in their 20's, were Iowa Quakers who had joined Brown's group in Springdale. Edwin was captured in the engine house and executed in 1860; but his brother, Barclay, was stationed at the farmhouse as a rearguard and managed to escape. Finally, there was Francis Jackson Merriam, the grandson of Francis Jackson, the aristocratic Boston abolitionist, who had joined the raiders just a few days before the attack, and who had brought his $600.00 inheritance with him. He was assigned to the farmhouse, and was never captured.[113]

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THE EFFECTS OF THE HARPERS FERRY RAID ON THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH

The importance of the Harpers Ferry raid went far beyond the occurrences of October 16, 17, and 18. Wendell Phillips expressed what he felt to be the long-range affect of John Brown's action:

> He has abolished slavery in Virginia. History will date Virginia Emancipation from Harper's Ferry. True, the slave is still there. So, when the tempest uproots a pine on your hills, it looks green for months,—a year or two. Still, it is timber, not a tree. John Brown has loosened the roots of the slave system; it only breathes,—it does not live,—hereafter.[114]

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[113] The descriptions of the raiders come from the following sources: Redpath, *op. cit.*, 249-250; DuBois, *op. cit.*, 280-286; Villard, *op. cit.*, 414-415; Oates, *op. cit.*, 275-276; Sanborn, *op. cit.*, 546-547; Hinton, *op. cit.*, 274-276. DuBois claims two other possible Negro participants. Jeremiah Anderson, who was killed during the raid, is believed by DuBois to be a mulatto. He is listed with the Negroes in all the original reports of the Chatham Convention. John Anderson, a free Negro from Boston, is not listed in other accounts of the raid, but DuBois says "whether he arrived and was killed, or was too late but never knew settled." Sanborn also mentions John Anderson as a 22nd member of the raiding party, but says that it is uncertain whether he participated or not.

[114] Phillips, *op. cit.*, 290.

There was a tremendous response throughout the North to John Brown's execution. Abolitionists, along with liberal and moderate Northerners, who didn't like slavery anyway, were so impressed with the courage with which Brown faced his trial, and by the eloquence of his letters and interviews from jail, that they were deeply disturbed at his execution. They gathered together in cities and towns to pay tribute to the man and to condemn the South for hanging him. Church bells were tolled from New England to Kansas. Town officials in Albany, New York, fired a 100-gun salute. In Hudson and virtually all the other towns in Ohio's Western Reserve, hundreds of people crowded into their churches for commemorative services. Banks, businesses, and public offices were closed all day in Akron. At Cleveland, 1,400 people held a memorial meeting. Public prayer meetings were held in Philadelphia, New York City, Syracuse, Rochester, Fitchburg, Plymouth, New Bedford, and Manchester. In many places blacks held their own memorial services for John Brown. In Boston, all Negro businesses were closed, three prayer meetings were held, and blacks wore black arm bands on December 2, the day Brown was hanged. New York Negroes met at the Shiloh Church for their commemoration. In Philadelphia, Negroes closed their businesses and held two public prayer meetings. Blacks in Pittsburgh and Detroit also held ceremonies, eulogizing their dead friend. Funds were sent across the country for John Brown's family, and for the families of some of the other raiders. And finally, in the weeks that followed the execution, Northern writers, poets and intellectuals enshrined Brown in an almost endless procession of poems, songs, essays, letters, and public addresses.[113]

The raid, trial and execution served to awaken the conscience of much of the nation. At first, people were appalled at the lawlessness of Brown's attempt. They saw him as a murderer and condemned him. But, throughout the trial, Brown's firm reiteration of his purpose made an impression on the watching nation. "Wider and wider circles were beginning dimly and more clearly to recognize that his lawlessness was in obedience to the highest call of self-sacrifice for the welfare of his fellowmen. They began to ask themselves, "What is this cause that can inspire such devotion?"[114] John Brown

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[113] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 240-243; Oates, *op. cit.*, 354-355; *A Tribute of Respect Commemorative of the Worth and Sacrifice of John Brown of Ossawatomie* (Cleveland, 1859); Letter from Justus Morgan, West Springfield, Massachusetts, to Wise, December 2, 1859, *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress.

[114] Dubois, *op. cit.*, 156.

became the most powerful abolition argument yet offered. People got the sense that the issue could not be avoided much longer, and they felt forced to choose the side that felt most comfortable to their own consciences—for many that meant beside John Brown, in feeling if not in action. Brown's supporters in Cleveland passed a resolution which precisely expressed this change in attitude:

> The irrepressible conflict is upon us, and it will never end until Freedom or slavery go to the wall. In such a contest and under such dire necessity we may 'without fear and without reproach' let freedom stand and the Union be dissolved.[117]

The Harpers Ferry raid seriously affected the future direction of the abolitionist movement. Once it had been dominated by strong pacifist politics, but after October of 1859, anger and determination fused into a new position of militancy which demanded the end to slavery, by any means necessary—and violence was felt by many to be one of the necessities. Frederick Douglass wrote in the November, 1859, issue of the *Liberator*:

> [Brown] has attacked slavery with the weapons precisely adapted to bring it to the death. Moral considerations have long since been exhausted upon Slaveholders. It is in vain to reason with them. One might as well hunt bears with ethics and political economy for weapons, as to seek to "pluck the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor" by mere force of moral law. Slavery is a system of brute force. It shields itself behind *might*, rather than right. It must be met with its own weapons.[118]

Many abolitionist had abandoned their commitments to peaceful means, and some seemed almost to look forward to a confrontation which appeared more and more unavoidable. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in his journal on December 2, 1859: "This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution,—quite as much needed as the old one. Even now as I write, they are leading Old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon."[119]

Even Moncure Conway, an abolitionist who had left his Southern home because of his convictions, finally, after much agonizing, joined in praising Brown as a martyr, even though he realized that

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[117] *A Tribute of Respect.*

[118] Foner, *op. cit.*, 466.

[119] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston, 1886), 347.

the South's firm commitment to slavery could well lead to fratricidal war.[120] Charles H. Langston, a black abolitionist, issued a statement denying that he had a hand in the Harpers Ferry raid. But he went on to express his solidarity with the attempt at slave liberation: "But what shall I deny? I cannot deny that I feel the very deepest sympathy with the immortal John Brown in his heroic and daring effort to free the slaves." This sentiment, according to Benjamin Quarles, in *Black Abolitionists,* "mirrored the reaction of the overwhelming majority of black Americans."[121]

Few abolitionists had any enthusiasm about arguing for nonresistance and moral suasion after John Brown was hanged. They seemed to agree with "Old Ossawatomie" himself, and the statement he handed to a guard on his way to the gallows: "I, John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without much bloodshed; it might be done."[122]

John Brown left a deep mark on the South as well as the North. The great Southern fear of a slave uprising was exacerbated by Brown's attempt at Harpers Ferry. After the raid, Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia received several letters and telegrams claiming that bands of men were invading the South. Suspicious people were jailed or run out of town, books critical of the South were publicly burned, and the whole region was in a state of alarm. Planters in South Carolina wrote to Wise asking to be sent samples of the pikes Brown had intended to give to slaves; they wanted desperately to know a little about this shadowy enemy.[123] Another South Carolinian wanted to know what contacts Brown had in that state, for antislavery agents were suspected everywhere.[124] Incendiary fires after the raid had Southerners especially worried, as they were linked with a much larger slave rebellion. One of the many telegrams Wise received during this time said: "A gentleman just from Charlestown reports that Mr. Sherley was burnt out last night, and it is reported that 100 men crossed the Shenandoah river." The next day another telegram came: "The majority think the

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[120] Fredrickson, *op. cit.*, 43.
[121] Quarles, *op. cit.*, 240.
[122] Buchanan, *op. cit.*, 147.
[123] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, John W. Menimenny, Georgetown, South Carolina, October 22, 1859.
[124] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Joseph Walker to Andrew Hunter, November 21, 1859; Lawrence Thatcher, Memphis, to John Brown, October 3, 1859, John Brown Papers, Library of Congress.

recent fires made by Negroes. . . ."[125] The Chicago *Tribune* properly identified the fear that Southerners were feeling toward "foreigners" and toward their own slaves:

> Belshazzar's knees did not tremble more, when the hand of Providence wrote his doom upon the inner wall of his palace, than do these "chivalrous Virginians," whose imagination conjure up millions of Browns and Smiths. . . .[126]

The Southern authorities, and especially Henry Wise and Andrew Hunter, the prosecuting state's attorney, tried to do two contradictory things in the face of the Harpers Ferry raid. On the one hand they tried to minimize the importance of the raid, stating that no slave support was offered Brown because slaves were loyal to their masters. But, on the other hand, they were incredibly anxious to get rid of Brown because of the real threat that he posed as a rallying point for both Northern abolitionists and Southern slaves. Andrew Hunter wrote to Wise: "The judge is for observing all the judicial decencies, so am I, but at double quick time."[127] Hunter wanted the appearance of a fair trial, but he also wanted Brown hanged as soon as possible, before the old man inspired some other action against the South. Brown's execution, on December 2, came less than seven weeks after his capture. All the raiders who were caught were eventually hanged, at a total expense of $250,000 to the State of Virginia. Between one and three thousand troops were stationed in the Harpers Ferry area for months after the raid, and militias all over the South were on alert. Wise offered a $500 reward for the four known fugitives, Tidd, Owen Brown, Barclay Coppoc, and Merriam. Clearly the raid presented a formidable threat to Virginia and to the South.[128]

Wise and Hunter also feared that Brown would be rescued from the Charlestown jail where he was being held. Several threats were sent to Wise promising that Brown would be released. The mayor of Detroit reported that 30 men were leaving that city on their way to rescue Brown, and from Kansas came a telegram:

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[125] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, John W. Garrett, Pres., B & O Railroad, Camden Station, Baltimore, to Wise, October 26, 1859; *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress, Andrew Hunter, Charlestown, to Wise, November 14, 1859; Allen P. Green, Mayor, Columbia, South Carolina, to Wise, November 14, 1859; Telegram to Wise from I. Lucius Davis, Harpers Ferry, November 19, 1859.

[126] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Chicago, *Tribune*, November 1, 1859, "The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry."

[127] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Andrew Hunter, Charlestown, October 22, 1859; *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress, Andrew Hunter, Charlestown, to Wise, November 18, 1859.

[128] Dumond, *op. cit.*, 353; *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Thomas C. Green, Mayor of Charlestown, to Wise, November 8, 1859; C. D. Fitzpatrick, Chambersburg, to Daniel Logan, October 26, 1859.

"Organized parties have secretly left Kansas supposed destination Virginia. Jim Lane understood head of Movement, think they design Brown's rescue." Brown was held under heavy guard all during his incarceration. The day of his hanging Charlestown was filled with troops, and no strangers were allowed into the city; women and children were urged to stay at home, for fear that an attempt would be made to rescue Brown at the last moment.[129]

Many Southerners were already pushing for secession before October of 1859, but the raid served as an example of abuse toward the South which provided a good excuse for disunion. Although many Northerners despised abolitionism, the Southern fear of growing antislavery feeling was heightened considerably by the Harpers Ferry raid. Letters poured in to Wise, warning him of the "villany of Northern abolitionists," and urging him to "bring them all to trial. . . ."[130] Abolitionists fed this fire, also, as they claimed that "All of us at the North Sympathize with the *Martyr of Harper's Ferry*."[131] Francis E. Bigelow, a supporter of Brown, wrote from Worcester, Massachusetts: "If he is hung it will raise 10,000 John Browns."[132] The South feared this ever so much, but hang him they must, despite the warning from both North and South that doing so would make a martyr of the man.

Brown forced the South to retreat from any further accommodation with the North. He offered Southern secessionists an argument and a warning. The argument was used by the South to hasten secession: The raid symbolized the ruthlessness of the North, of abolitionism, in attacking the cherished institutions of the South; and to emphasize this argument, the South enlarged the significance of the raid by punishing its participants harshly and quickly. The warning raised by the Harpers Ferry raid was the danger of black insurrection, but this the South whispered fearfully to itself.

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[129] *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress, "A Friend," Worcester, Massachusetts, to Wise, November 30, 1859; *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, G. W. Chase, Kansas to Wise, November 29, 1859; Henry A. Wise, Richmond, to Andrew Hunter, Charlestown, October 22, 1859; Col. Commandant Robert W. Baylor, Harpers Ferry, to Wise, October 26, 1859; Major General William B. Taliaferro, Charlestown, to Wise, November 2, 1859.

[130] *John Brown Papers*, Library of Congress, Amos A. Lawrence, Boston, to Wise, October 25, 1859; John Smith, Barre, Pennsylvania to Wise, November 17, 1859; *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, "National Democrat," Chicago, to Wise, October 22, 1859.

[131] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Samuel W. Dewey, New York, to Wise, October 30, 1859.

[132] *Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise*, Francis E. Bigelow, Worcester, Massachusetts, to Wise, November 2, 1859; J. W. Depress, Indianapolis, to Wise, October 31, 1859; Henry Wagoner, Jr., Springfield, Illinois, to Wise, October 26, 1859.

CONCLUSION
THE MEANING OF JOHN BROWN'S RAID

The raid organized by John Brown at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859, was a pivotal event which pushed the nation closer to civil war. There is ample proof that John Brown was not a madman, but rather a dedicated activist who had—perhaps—more courage, not less sanity, than other antislavery men and women of his generation. Specifically, we can conclude that: (1) Brown's life was a progression of antislavery feeling, beginning with a mild, educational approach, but later recognizing the necessity of violence, especially after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the events in Kansas in which Brown participated. (2) The plan which Brown developed was well thought out, and many contemporaries, as well as historians evaluating the raid later, were confident that it was a feasible one. The efficacy of guerrilla war has been proven, and there is considerable feeling—from Redpath, Tidd, DuBois, Stavis, and others—that Brown had a good chance of success, once he got out of Harpers Ferry. It is also not unreasonable that Brown hoped to save lives by his campaign. Assuming that a frontal attack on slavery had become necessary, a guerrilla war would probably have been less bloody than the extended conventional warfare that took 600,000 lives. (3) The fact that many highly respected people supported Brown also re-inforces the argument that his contemporaries saw him, not as mad, but as serious, dedicated, and capable.

Evidence leads us to believe that John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was a reasonable, though dangerous, act which could have succeeded. As to the sanity of the initiator of the raid, we have ample testimony from his friends as to the integrity of John Brown. But, if a doubt still remains as to his worth or sanity, the words of an enemy should lay them to rest. Henry Wise had considered the charges of insanity levelled at Brown, but after the execution, the Virginia Governor gave his own opinion of the accusation:

> They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman. He is a bundle of the best nerves I ever saw; cut and thrust and bleeding, and in bonds. He is a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude, and simple ingenuousness. He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say that he was humane to his prisoners, and he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth.[133]

The controversy over Brown's sanity and over the significance of the Harpers Ferry raid stems from a lack of understanding.

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[133] Quoted in Stavis, *op. cit.*, 140.

shared by our own age as well as Brown's, that a white man might voluntarily risk his life to free a bunch of miserable slaves. Two prejudices are operating in this lack of understanding. One is the prejudice that refuses to admit any legitimacy in a small group of people challenging an institution which they see as unjust. From this point of view, had Brown been a captain in the Union Army, he would have been a hero, but, without the uniform of established power, his actions against slavery could not be understood. The second prejudice is composed of racism and elitism, and insists on evaluating history and human worth from a white perspective and from the perspective of the well-to-do elements of society. Brown recognized this prejudice in his fellow man:

> Had I interfered in the manner which I admit. . .in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends. . .and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.[124]

These words, spoken by John Brown at his arraignment, could be repeated with relevance by black and white revolutionaries today.